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ABSTRACT

In order to break the cycle of poverty for disadvantaged children and their families, action must be taken to redistribute income and other resources and improve services and institutions that serve the poor. Successful programs are the following: (1) comprehensive, flexible, and responsive; (2) staffed by workers who develop relationships of trust and respect with children and families; (3) capable of dealing with the child as part of a family and with the family as part of a neighborhood and community; (4) able to tailor their services to respond to the distinctive needs of those at greatest risk; (5) well-managed by individuals with identifiable skills and attitudes; and (6) based on common theoretical foundations that emphasize prevention, client outcomes, and long-term change and development. The major attributes of effective services are fundamentally at odds with the dominant ways that most large institution and systems are funded and the ways they are expected to assure accountability, quality, and equity. What may be needed is a new culture for human service systems for a "renewal of the public sector. "Strategies for wider implementation of effective programs would include financing, training, technical assistance, and expanding public understanding. The implications for society would be profound. (JB)

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SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS AND THE BUREAUCRATIC DILEMMA: CURRENT DELIBERATIONS

Lisbeth B. Schorr

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN IN POVERTY

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University. Its goal is to strengthen programs and policies for children and their families who live in poverty in the United States. The Center seeks to achieve this goal through interdisciplinary analysis and dissemination of information about public and private initiatives in the areas of early childhood care and education, maternal and child health, and the integration and coordination of services for young children and their families.

The Speech Reprint Series is part of the Center's overall publications program which is intended to disseminate important ideas that will contribute to improved services for poor young children and their families. The Center gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for the core support that makes the publications program possible.

Successful Programs and the Bureaucratic Dilemma: Current Deliberations

Lisbeth B. Schorr

Lisbeth B. Schorr, co-author with Daniel Schorr of Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage, *is a lecturer in social medicine at Harvard University and is a member of the National Center for Children in Poverty's Council of Advisors. Her January 1991 talk at the Center consolidated much of her own work and the work of others who have analyzed successful programs and efforts to overcome obstacles to widespread implementation of effective innovations. In this reprint of her remarks Ms. Schorr also draws on the deliberations of the National Academy of Sciences' National Forum on the Future of Children and Families in its 1990 Workshop on Effective Services for Young Children: Assessing the State of Our Knowledge and Identifying Strategies for Action.*

So much new interest is focused on efforts to improve services for disadvantaged children and their families that it seems timely to attempt an assessment of several issues:

- What we now know about what makes programs effective
- The state of current thinking about how effective programs could reach much larger numbers
- The implications of current developments for new initiatives in the years ahead.

Today's high level of concern with children's and family issues reflects widespread anxiety that large numbers of children are not growing up to be functioning adults. David Hamburg, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, speaks of "an epidemic of child neglect large enough to threaten the future of the society."

In a nation like ours, founded on citizen suspicion of powerful government, and in a time of rising disaffection with government, few social problems emerge with sufficient urgency to call for major departures from past practices and major new investments. However, the rapidly deteriorating indicators of children's well-being, especially in areas of concentrated poverty, seem to be creating a broadening consensus around the need for fundamental change.

For those of us who consider effective services for children and families to be central to breaking the cycle of disadvantage, now is the time to prepare ourselves. We must be ready to act when the recession recedes, when optimism about the potential for constructive collective action rises, and even for the time when growing desperation creates renewed receptivity to bold new initiatives.

Two Kinds of Action Needed

Two kinds of action are needed. The *first* includes efforts to reduce income poverty by redistributing income and other resources, primarily through Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, child

Today's high level of concern with children's and family issues reflects widespread anxiety that large numbers of children are not growing up to be functioning adults.

support, and health insurance; and through economic policies that lead to full employment, that assure decent wages for work, that provide job training and placement, and that make available affordable housing.

A clear majority of the poor would be helped by these income redistribution and economic policies. However, a subset of the poor will require more than changes in income and economic opportunities to become part of the American dream., Somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of the poor will not be lifted out of poverty and disadvantage solely by income supports or a rising economic tide. For this population it is pointless to argue about whether economic supports are more or less important than is action on a *second* front: good schools, high quality health services, safe communities, or services to strengthen families. For the children and families living in the midst of concentrated poverty and dislocation, all of these are essential to the climb out of poverty.

The good news is that we now know the attributes of services and institutions that can, in fact, succeed—even with the children and families who live in the midst of great social dislocation. The bad news is that these effective services and supports are very different from those that prevail.

Essential Attributes of Successful Programs

A wide variety of sources now converge in identifying the essential attributes of successful programs.

- ***Successful programs are comprehensive, flexible, and responsive.*** They overcome fragmentation through staff versatility, flexibility, and by active collaboration across bureaucratic and professional boundaries.

An effective prenatal care program may not provide housing assistance or drug treatment, but it does not ignore the impending eviction or the sudden revelation of a drug problem by one of its patients. A family preservation professional may help an overwhelmed mother clean her kitchen; or a school principal may add a washing machine to her office equipment. In responding to a wide range of needs, these programs do not provide everything to everyone, but they tend to offer more than a single strand of service or support, and they continue to respond over time.

It is this responsive stance of individual staff members and of an institution as a whole that characterizes successful programs. No one in these programs says, "This may be what you need, but helping you get it is not part of my job or outside our jurisdiction." While always keeping their primary mission in mind, staff seem to be forever willing, in the words of Harvard University's Kennedy School Professor Mary Jo Bane, to "push the boundaries of their job description" and to take on an "extended role" in the lives of their students (or patients or clients).

- ***Staff members in successful programs build relationships of trust and respect with children and families.*** They work in settings that provide them with the time, training, skills, and institutional support necessary to develop meaningful personal relationships, and to provide services respectfully, ungrudgingly, and collaboratively.

Home visitors say that relationships are what make other activities work—such as parent education. Psychiatrist James Comer says that relationship issues are particularly important among those low-income people who have given up on helping systems.

- ***Successful programs deal with the child as part of a family, and with the family as part of a neighborhood and community.*** Most successful programs have deep roots in the community. They are not imposed from without, they are not "parachuted" into communities, but they

Effective programs do not provide everything to everyone, but they tend to offer more than a single strand of service or support, and they continue to respond over time.

are integrated carefully and collaboratively with local community needs, resources, and strengths. They do not work with one generation alone, but with two—and often three.

The clinician treating an infant for recurrent diarrhea sees beyond the patient on the examining table to whether the family needs a source of clean water or help from a public health nurse or social worker to obtain nonmedical services. The Comer schools in New Haven and many Head Start programs and family support centers make efforts to meet the needs of parents as well as children in the process of helping parents enhance their own and their children's development.

- ***Programs that are successful with the most disadvantaged populations tailor their services to respond to the distinctive needs of those at greatest risk.*** Whether they work exclusively with high-risk populations or with a more heterogeneous population, successful programs report that individualization, intensiveness, and comprehensiveness are even more crucial for those at highest risk than for less-disadvantaged families.

For example, conventional obstetrical medicine is simply not enough to meet the needs of a pregnant teenager who is depressed, frightened, not eating properly, using drugs or alcohol, and has no permanent home. She needs a great deal more if she is to deliver a healthy baby and get the help she needs in preparing to care for her new child.

These programs persevere in their attempts to reach the hardest to reach; their efforts do not stop after a referral has been made or an initial obstacle overcome. Program staff observe that multiply-disadvantaged children and families are

often so disconnected from the supports traditionally provided by families that they cannot effectively provide health, education, or social services unless they couple these formal, specialized functions with the supports traditionally provided by families.

- ***Successful programs are well-managed, usually by highly competent, energetic, committed and responsible individuals with clearly identifiable skills and attitudes.*** These managers define and adhere to clear goals and missions, but they also provide for great flexibility in day-to-day operations. They have no illusion that they can implement the perfect model program; rather, they allow their services to continually evolve in order to maintain responsiveness to individual, family, and community needs over time.

  Considering how many people believe that behind every successful program is a leader of such charismatic power that there are no more than a handful of such magical persons to be found in the land, it is significant that Olivia Golden of the Kennedy School has identified a number of distinctive (but nonmagical) attributes possessed by managers of effective programs. These individuals have been able to use identifiable management techniques to create a new organizational culture that relies less on rules and more on outcomes, and that is stable enough to permit staff to learn from their own mistakes and to draw on a broad base of experience and research to keep the program responsive to changing needs.

- ***Successful programs have common theoretical foundations that emphasize prevention, client outcomes, and long-term change and development.*** Client (or patient or student) needs seem to guide these programs more powerfully than the imperatives of the institutions and systems within which they operate. Helping children and families takes precedence over reducing error rates.

  These programs seek to replace the prevailing preoccupation with failure and crisis with an

Most successful programs have very concrete interim goals, but they see their purpose as helping to alter life trajectories.

orientation that is long-term, preventive, and empowering. First-graders in the Baltimore schools' Success for All program are given "whatever help they need" to acquire basic reading-related skills before they begin to fail and to fall behind. Even programs like Homebuilders, whose intervention is triggered by a crisis, focus on long-term change and on helping families better control their lives. Most successful programs have very concrete interim goals, but they see their purpose as helping to alter life trajectories.

Implications of the Attributes of Effective Services for Systems Change

It is impossible to contemplate these characteristics of effective programs without being struck by how different they are from most prevailing programs. As Mary Jo Bane says, "The key to the success of these programs lies in the quality of interactions that go on between individual service providers and clients. These interactions tend to be situation specific and immediately responsive, like the interactions that go on in effective families or classrooms. They tend to be performed by relatively autonomous professionals who exercise a fair amount of discretion in responding to needs."

Some observers conclude that programs incorporating these attributes could never be made available to large numbers because such programs are difficult to replicate and they tend to exist primarily outside or at the margins of large human service systems. With the notable exception of the Head Start program, initiated as part of the War on Poverty, and the efforts to institutionalize family preservation and certain aspects of school reform, a policy thrust to undertake systematic social change to make these unusual attributes the norm has not been considered seriously among developers of social policy. In fact, a quite contrary view is typical. *Healthy Children,* for

example, the 1988 report from the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, concludes its review of effective nurse home-visiting programs by noting that these programs are "run by dedicated, enthusiastic, and particularly skilled people, so it is premature to conclude that the home visitor approach should be broadly applied."

There is no doubt that the major attributes of effective services are fundamentally at odds with the dominant ways that most large institutions and systems are funded and the ways they are expected to assure accountability, quality, and equity:

- Comprehensiveness is at odds with categorical funding.
- Flexibility and front-line worker discretion are at odds with the traditional training of professionals and managers and with conventional approaches to assuring accountability.
- Intensiveness and individualization are at odds with pressures to assure equity despite insufficient funds.
- A long-term preventive orientation is at odds with pressures for immediate payoffs.
- A program's ability to evolve over time is at odds with the pervasiveness of short-term and often unpredictable funding.

Perhaps the most important conclusions of the recent National Academy of Science National Forum on the Future of Children and Families' Workshop on Effective Services for Young Children was that the time for more small-scale demonstrations is past, that the challenge now is to expand the reach of successful programs, and that the task of taking successful programs to all who most need them cannot be accomplished without changing large systems and institutions in ways that make them hospitable to and supportive of the essential attributes of effective programs.

We have operated too long on the assumption that program success alone will guarantee long-term

survival and growth. In the absence of supportive and responsive systems, successful programs do not contain the seeds of their own replication because they do not create systems change. Even the dissemination of information about successful models does not result in their replication in the absence of systems change. Local communities have to own and shape local programs, but local communities and individual professionals can't change state and federal regulations or funding incentives; nor can they protect their innovations from the bureaucratic pressures that stifle the unusual.

The importance of the institutional setting to the work of individual professionals was brought home to me recently in a letter from a physician working in a hospital-sponsored community health center. She wrote that the message of my book, *Within Our Reach*,

> makes me feel at once supported and frustrated. Supported, because it reinforces exactly what I try to do, but frustrated, because so often the message I get from my institution is to behave all those other ways: rigid, bureaucratic, performing only functions that have been strictly defined. . .

Unfortunately, we know a lot more about what makes for good programs than what makes for good, supportive institutions and systems. We know least about how to create and sustain such systems, especially under public auspices. In this connection it is interesting to consider the influential new book on education reform, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, by John Chubb and Terry Moe. Although they start from a totally different perspective, Chubb and Moe's findings about the characteristics of effective schools are strikingly similar to mine: They found that school effectiveness required flexibility in decision making and autonomy from external bureaucratic influence. They also found, as I did, that the characteristics of the institutions that are effective "turn out to be largely incompatible with the way the system works, and they are unlikely to take root except under rather special circumstances."

Furthermore they found, just as I did, that though we now can distinguish effective from ineffective schools, we know little about how to use public policy to develop and nurture desirable characteristics

within existing schools and education systems. Chubb and Moe conclude that because the institutional contexts within which schools now operate are incompatible with effective schooling, we should get rid of bureaucratic pressures by turning the schools over to the market place.

I don't want to make the argument here about the dangers of jumping from the frying pan into the fire, by replacing bureaucratic pressures with market pressures. Let me just point out that this line of argument would suggest that we privatize and let market pressures shape not just schools but also health departments and social services, child welfare and child protection services. We cannot simply give up on government. I believe we are left with no alternative other than to learn how to change large public systems and institutions in such fundamental ways that they can support a reasonable degree of comprehensiveness, flexibility, autonomy, and discretion. The challenge is essentially to introduce a new culture into human service systems and into major governmental bureaucracies, to bring about what Harvard political scientist Steven Kelman calls the "renewal of the public sector."

Questions of how this might be done were a major topic of the National Forum's Workshop on Effective Services for Young Children. We considered several strategies aimed at wider implementation of effective programs for disadvantaged children and their families. We agreed that action in several arenas is needed: financing, training and technical assistance, coordination and collaboration, a shift to outcome measures, and efforts to broaden public understanding. We also agreed that these strategies are so interactive that all will have to be pursued, for none will be effective in isolation.

Strategies Aimed at Wider Implementation of Effective Programs

Financing. New funding mechanisms to support comprehensive and coherent services could include careful decategorization of certain categorical funds, automatic waivers, and the capacity to pool public and private funding. Such mechanisms could become part of demonstrations that would target

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resources to geographic areas where poverty and other risk factors are concentrated. Eligibility for services would be based on residence in the area.

Through the use of automatic waivers and other regulatory or legislative changes, funds from maternal and child health programs, compensatory education, family support, child care, mental health and social services would become predictable sources of support for comprehensive programs targeted on high-risk populations defined geographically. Neighborhood targeting would minimize barriers of access, would reduce fragmentation, and would affect the powerful neighborhood-level determinants of child and family well-being. The National Forum's Workshop suggested that the White House, through its new Economic Empowerment Task Force, may be in a position to support state and local communities seeking to combine multiple federal funding streams for this purpose.

Modifying public funding practices in this way could be modest in scale without being trivial. Such initiatives would begin to change lives among the populations at highest risk. Simultaneously this strategy would begin to grapple with a broad range of systems issues. It would give expression to a public policy that would get away from making eligibility for services contingent on individual proof of failure, but it would recognize that whole communities may be so depleted that a critical mass of new sources of opportunity and support are required if ordinary youngsters are to succeed in climbing out of poverty and despair. Where systems have failed whole communities in the past, change probably must achieve a visible, critical mass to have a significant impact and to inspire confidence in both clients and program staff to believe that change is real this time and here to stay. A neighborhood focus would make it possible to achieve such a critical mass with substantially less money than required by universal programs. The National Forum's Workshop also pointed out that

place-specific models have significant potential for building "community." Some participants advocated pursuit of a "saturation strategy" in four to six areas of concentrated poverty. This strategy would combine efforts to provide a broad range of effective human services with efforts to improve housing, job training, community and economic development, and public safety.

Training. We need new training mechanisms and the modification of existing training mechanisms to produce more people who can function as both front-line workers and managers in effective programs. In successful programs front-line workers as well as program managers exhibit skills and attitudes that do not seem to be the products of conventional professional training. They are able to build trusting, collaborative relationships, work flexibly across disciplinary and professional boundaries, exercise front-line discretion, and address a complex interplay of problems as well as utilize distinctive managerial skills. These abilities are not the products of training alone, but the creation of appropriate new training capacity would increase the numbers of skilled individuals who could function in organizations that incorporate and create these expectations, and who could comfortably adopt an expanded definition of what it means to act like a professional. The availability of high quality professional training could also help to make work in effective programs attractive to a new pool of talented, eager, and committed individuals.

As Douglas Nelson of the Casey Foundation has pointed out, new training efforts must place far greater emphasis on:

- Communication and interaction skills that encourage more collaborative, respectful, trusting relationships between provider and client, patient, pupil, or family;

- The family and community context in assessing and addressing problems and in providing support; and on

- The broad range of diagnostic skills and resource knowledge that professionals should have to operate in more than a single, narrow arena.

In successful programs workers and managers are able to build trusting, collaborative relationships, work flexibly across disciplinary and professional boundaries, exercise front-line discretion, and address a complex interplay of problems as well as utilize distinctive managerial skills.

For professionals to function effectively in new kinds of settings and relationships requires not only new skills but a different *mindset*. Douglas Nelson has proposed that this mindset can be taught best through practice-based training in exemplary service programs. Academic institutions could be encouraged simultaneously to undertake much more cross-disciplinary training than they are now engaged in.

Technical assistance. States, communities, and local agencies need competent technical assistance, both in program development and with their efforts to change policies and practices to better reflect the lessons of successful programs, to make maximum use of available funds, and to shift to a greater use of outcome measures.

Organizations that seek to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children require information about the attributes of successful programs to put such programs in place. But they need much more. Many communities may recognize the need for change, but they don't know how to get started on making change happen. States that expect to reform their policies and practices to create more supportive settings for effective programs will need highly skilled, knowledgeable, and individualized technical assistance. The National Forum's Workshop discussed the need for regional centers and state-based intermediaries to provide technical assistance to state and local governments and to provider groups to help them overcome some of their organizational and financial impediments to more effective services. Intermediaries like Ounce of Prevention in Illinois and Friends of the Family in Maryland seem to be successful in nurturing local programs, in buffering them from bureaucratic and political pressures, and in providing relevant training and technical assistance.

Shift to outcome measures. The programs essential to changing outcomes for disadvantaged youngsters are unlikely to receive adequate funds under more flexible conditions if they cannot document their effectiveness in improved real-world outcomes. An enhanced capacity to measure outcomes would go far to encourage policies and programs to focus on changes in the lives of people. By shifting accountability from reliance on rigid rules and documenting processes to reliance on substantive results, human service programs could more easily become more comprehensive and flexible and adopt the other attributes of effective programs.

A great deal of sustained and thoughtful work will be required to develop the critical outcome indicators that allow informed judgments of whether a program is accomplishing its intended purpose. Outcome measures must be designed carefully so they will not become instruments of program corruption or distortion. But considering what has been learned about successful programs, it seems essential to engage in this struggle rather than to continue past practices that put a premium on blind adherence to rules at the expense of accomplishment. A shift toward reliance on outcome measures would encourage what Steven Kelman writes of as "the wise exercise of discretion, judgment, and creativity to achieve agreed upon ends" that characterizes effective programs.

Expanding public understanding. We need continuing efforts to build greater public understanding to support long-term investment in effective programs and to make changes in systems, policies, and practices. It is essential that many more policymakers and opinion molders come to understand a few key points:

- The most serious problems of disadvantaged children, youth, and families are inextricably bound up with changes in the American society and economy. These societal changes require societal responses, because they are far more powerful than the changes that are under control of individuals and families.

- Effective interventions are a good investment even when they require substantial initial funding.

By shifting accountability from reliance on rigid rules and documenting processes to reliance on substantive results, human service programs could more easily become more comprehensive and flexible and adopt the other attributes of effective programs.

Society's stake in investing in promising solutions is so great that a continuing failure to undertake promising or proven programs of intervention and support will be destructive of the national interest.

- The elements of many promising solutions are now reasonably well known, but widespread implementation cannot be accomplished in the absence of fundamental systems changes.

- There are no quick, cheap fixes. A long-term view is essential because the impact of effective services or their absence must be seen inter-generationally. The results of effective interventions are worth waiting for even though they rarely can be documented during a single budget cycle or during the term of office of a program's political champion.

Society's Stake

There is growing agreement that there are identifiable policies and programs that could improve the odds for children now lacking the family and neighborhood environments to provide them with the protection, nurturance, and social capital they need to succeed in school and in life. These programs, however, are significantly different from those that now prevail. What is called for is a fundamental transformation of both local programs and the policies that shape them. But the levers of change that have been available until now are not sufficiently connected to one another and they are not strong and far-reaching enough to bring about needed changes in the systems within which most programs operate.

Much activity and random experimentation is currently under way in local communities and states all around the nation aimed at improving the

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circumstances of disadvantaged children. But these appear to have little discernible long-range effect. The widespread yearning to do better could be transformed, however, into more effective and lasting action. We must begin to identify the strategies that could arm government officials, business leaders, practitioners, program managers, philanthropists, and concerned citizens with the tools they need to bring about systematic change on a scale that has a reasonable relationship to the magnitude of the need, and therefore a reasonable chance to succeed.

I don't have a blueprint for the needed reforms. I believe that every state and every local community will develop its own unique responses. No outsider and no central group can define the respective roles of health institutions, schools, and other helping systems, or of private philanthropy, business, and the various levels of government. I *do* know that we have the elements of successful programs to build on, but that we can't do it at bargain basement prices. And we can't do it overnight.

I also know that we can be certain that if the job is done well it will make a difference in the life of this nation. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund has observed that we have come to a point in our country where doing what's right converges with what we have to do to save our national skins!

Now that we have such wide agreement about the high stakes, now that we have so much of the knowledge we need, we have to make it happen. We have to make sure that the most excellent services the nation can provide will reach the children and families who need them the most. Then the children growing up without hope today will stand a real chance of becoming full participants in a thriving America of tomorrow!

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